Employee Assistance Programmes – A Stress Reliever in the Workplace

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Abstract

Work is the inevitable part of life. The nature of work is changing at a whirlwind speed largely due to technological advancement and globalization. The resultant negative impact on employee well-being may be personal or work related but the effects stretch beyond the workplace. Unhappiness of employees affects work pleasure, family relationships and thereby erodes the job performance. Troubled employees may indulge in unhealthy practices like alcoholism, drug intake, etc. to cope with their stress. To deal with the stressors and to promote job performance, employee assistance program (EAP) comes as salvage. EAP is a well established and pre-dominant component of occupational social work practice. Existing literature confirms that EAP has been emerging as an area of occupational social work in India and has gained momentum in foreign countries. EAP is not only dealing with the stress but also dealing with wide range of problems faced by employees. EAP is designed to alleviate and assist in eliminating variety of workplace problems (Attridge, et al., 2009). This paper examines the work related stress and the intervention of employee assistance programs in resolving it.

Keywords: Stress, Occupational social work, EAP, Employee Well-being, Job Performance

INTRODUCTION

The advancement of technology forces the employees to respond to the changing demands and needs at workplace. Changing working conditions and working environments may cause stress to the employees that result in increased absenteeism and attrition and thereby it affects productivity. In recent decades, there has been increasing awareness of the surprising financial losses in corporate, which have been attributed to such factors as burnout, stress, depression, drug abuse, and high employee turnover. The sustainability of the organisation is in the hands of the employees. Changing job nature poses threat to the employees’ health, which in turn affects the organizational health. The employees should support for the business success of the organisation and the later needs to support its employees for their holistic development. The productivity of the organisation is directly proportionate to the function of health, happiness and overall well-being of its employees. Every business runs on the same fuel – the energy of its people (Deb, 2006).

EAP – AN OVERVIEW

According to Sonnenstuhl and Trice, “Employee Assistance Programs are job-based programs within a work organization for the purposes of identifying ‘troubled employees’ motivating them to resolve their troubles, and providing access to counselling or treatment for those employees who need these services”. Employee Assistance programs is one of the dimensions of Occupational Social Work which address the wide range of personal and work related problems of the employees. The concept has emerged out of Occupational Alcoholism Programs (OAPs) which addressed only the substance abuse problem of the employees. Some of the key factors that played a pre-dominant role for the
development of EAP were The Hughes Act, 1970, National Institute on Alcoholism and Alcohol Abuse (NIAAA), Association of Labour Management and Administrators on Consultation of Alcoholism (ALMACA), etc. Despite the concept has gained astounding momentum in foreign countries like US, UK, Australia, Canada, etc., it is still in its infancy stage, as far as India is concerned. The changing nature of workplace demands the employee to be more competent and to work well in order to achieve the mission of the organisation. Regardless of the nature of the workplace, the employee should be free of troubles in order to perform their best. The problems of the employee will affect the work performance of them and thereby it will affect the organisation and the community too. Organisation needs to identify the problems of employees and should come forward to resolve it if they want the employees to give their level best. In this context, the services of employee assistance program come as a salvage to resolve the issues of the employees. The services are entirely voluntary and fully confidential in nature. It is a free service to the employees as well as their family members and the expenses will be borne by the organisations. It is an unknown area of Social Work Practice in India whereas it is a well known area of Social Work practices in UK USA, etc. The existing literature confirms the positive growth of EAPs in American organisations. EAPs have been increased from 6.5% in 1988 to 11.8% in 1990 and in 1994 to 33% and 75 – 80% of American organisations are operated EAPs.

STRESS AT WORKPLACE

Negative thoughts, behaviours, feelings in the workplace may manifest anxiety, depression or other feelings of physical or psychological discomfort. In the workplace, the employees may have difficulty in: (a) coping with workload, (b) concentration and (c) meeting deadlines that lead to sleep disturbances, irritability, headache, job dissatisfaction and low morale. Stress is prevalent in modern society, and can have many negative consequences in the business world including job burnout, ill health, high staff turnover, absenteeism, low morale and reduced efficiency and performance (Hanningan, Edward, & Burnard, 2004).

Stress may stem from marital or family relationships, mental health problems, feeling of anxiety and depression, child and elder care, financial issues, difficulties or conflict on the job (Insights from the Warren Shepell Research Group, 2002). Job stress occurs when the requirement of job do not match with the caliber and capabilities of employees. What is stressful to one employee may not be stressful to others. Some of the instigators of stress are: (i) Heavy work load (ii) infrequent rest breaks (iii) long work hours and shift work (iv) hectic and routine tasks (v) minimum utilization of workers skills (vi) lack of participation by workers in the decision making (vii) poor communication in the organisation (viii) lack of support from coworkers and supervisors (ix) too much responsibility (too many “hats to wear”) (x) lack of opportunity for growth, advancement and promotion (NIOSH Working Group, 1999).

COPING WITH STRESS

Employee facing stress resort to addictive behaviours like smoking, abusing drugs and alcohol which only further complicates the issue. To cope with stress employees indulged in unhealthy activities which will not only affect their health but also the family, organizational and societal health. Sick companies produce sick employees, as dysfunctional families produce dysfunctional family members; sick societies produce sick citizens (Carroll, 1996). Organizational stress will negatively impacts on employee’s well being and affect their ability to perform a job. Those effects may be in terms of both physiological (heart disease and cancer) and psychological such as burnout and depression. One of the strategies used for stress management includes EAP. EAP assists the employees to manage stress at work and at home. EAPs are the valuable resource in the organizations as it helps the troubled employees to overcome the issues faced by them. The organisations need to advertise EAP to its employees that will help them to gain knowledge about EAP and fully utilize its services.
EAP is a popular institutional mechanism for promoting health and well-being, (Cooper, Dewey & O.Driscoll, 2003; Ruiz, 2006; Strazewski, 2005). The rapid growth of EAP has been partly because of the workplace stress (Coles, 2003). While EAPs are readily affluent in the western countries they are still rare in other parts of world. EAP has become ubiquitous in the world of work. Employers use EAPs to show their respect and commitment to employees (Terry, M., & Larry, E. D. 2008)

PROBLEMS DEALT BY AN EAP

EAP is not only dealt with work related problems but also the wide range of problems faced by the employees – be it personal or family issues. Moreover, the beauty is that the EAP services are not only restricted to employees but includes the immediate family members of them. There are numbers of problems dealt by an EAP upon which few are: (i) Job stress (ii) anxiety (iii) depression (iv) marital problems (v) family problems (vi) financial and legal issues (vii) child and elder care (x) workplace bullying (vii) workplace violence (viii) workplace aggression (ix) absenteeism (x) critical incidents (xi) life transitions (xii) bereavement (xiii) trauma (xiv) Interpersonal conflict (xv) harassment (xvi) lack of interest in work (xvii) job performance problem (xviii) lateness for work (xix) managing change (xx) Health concerns, etc.,

EAP AND WELL-BEING

Heath, fitness and wellness are the three important components for an employee to perform. The WHO defines “health” is a state of physical, mental and social well being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity. The well-being of the employees is an integral part of the organizational development and EAP provides the vehicle for linking intervention between individual and organizational level to address issues related to employee well-being. EAP interventions are increasingly targeting workplace and workers wellness (Derr & Lindsay, 1999). EAP providers are now being encouraged to early interventions that encompass health/well being programs that begin from the perspective of developing strengths inherent within the client and the organisation (Van Den Bergh, 2000). So EAPs are assisting for the positive workplace culture.

SERVICES OFFERED BY AN EAP

The core service generally provided by an EAP is professional assessment, referral and short term counselling directed at personal, work related and family problems that might interfere with job performance or health (Carroll, 1997; Roman & Blum, 1992). Since its inception in the United States as alcohol rehabilitation programs (Lee & Gray, 1994) EAPs have broadened their scope to provide service for wide range of problems. The services of EAP are counselling, stress management, critical incident stress debriefing, trauma debriefing. According to the EAP practitioners in Chennai, the services of EAP are counselling, wellness coaching, and seminars and workshops based on the need of the employees and the suggestions of HRs.

CONCLUSION

Thus the concept of OAP is widened as EAP in order to deal with multi various challenges faced by the employees and their family members and thereby it assists to promote the well-being of them. EAP helps the employees to live healthy and peaceful life and thereby it benefits the organisation, employees and their family members.
REFERENCES